

Vision Impairment *in older adults*

Vision impairment is common among older adults and increases with age. Population-based studies have reported the prevalence of functional visual impairment (i.e., impairment despite wearing glasses) to be between 4 and 7 percent among individuals aged 71–74 years, increasing to 16 percent among individuals 80 years and over and to 39 percent among those over 90 years.^{1,2} Impaired vision causes or contributes to substantial disability among elders. For those age 60 years and older, distance visual acuity of merely 20/25 or greater is associated with increased risks of falls and fractures, and reduction in the useful visual field has been associated with increased risk of motor vehicle crashes in older drivers.^{3,4} In addition, vision loss from cataract, glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, and macular degeneration have all been shown to decrease quality of life.^{5–10}

Reports in the recent literature suggest there are effective means to treat the five major causes of visual disability among elders – uncorrected refractive error, cataract, glaucoma, diabetic retinopathy, and macular degeneration:

There is general consensus among eye care professionals that treating individuals who have functional deficits that result from refractive error with corrective lenses will reduce functional disability.¹¹

Cataract surgery has been shown to lead to improvements across virtually all quality of life measures among elderly patients who have functional visual deficits resulting only from cataracts.^{12–18}

One study of patients with glaucoma showed that reducing intraocular pressure by 30 percent may decrease by a factor of three the number of eyes losing vision, relative to untreated eyes among these patients.^{19,20}

Among patients with advanced diabetic retinopathy, laser treatment has been shown to reduce vision loss by 50 percent or more.^{21,22}

Among the small fraction of patients with treatable macular degeneration, laser treatment when compared with no treatment may reduce loss of vision at five years from 7 lines to 5 lines.²³ Moreover, early recognition of symptoms increases the likelihood of detecting new lesions at a treatable stage.²⁴

There is evidence that appropriate treatment for many of the visual conditions that cause disability in the elderly can significantly reduce the overall prevalence of visual disability and improve the quality of life for a large proportion of vulnerable elderly patients.

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